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Mapping School Choice in Massachusetts
Data and Findings 2003

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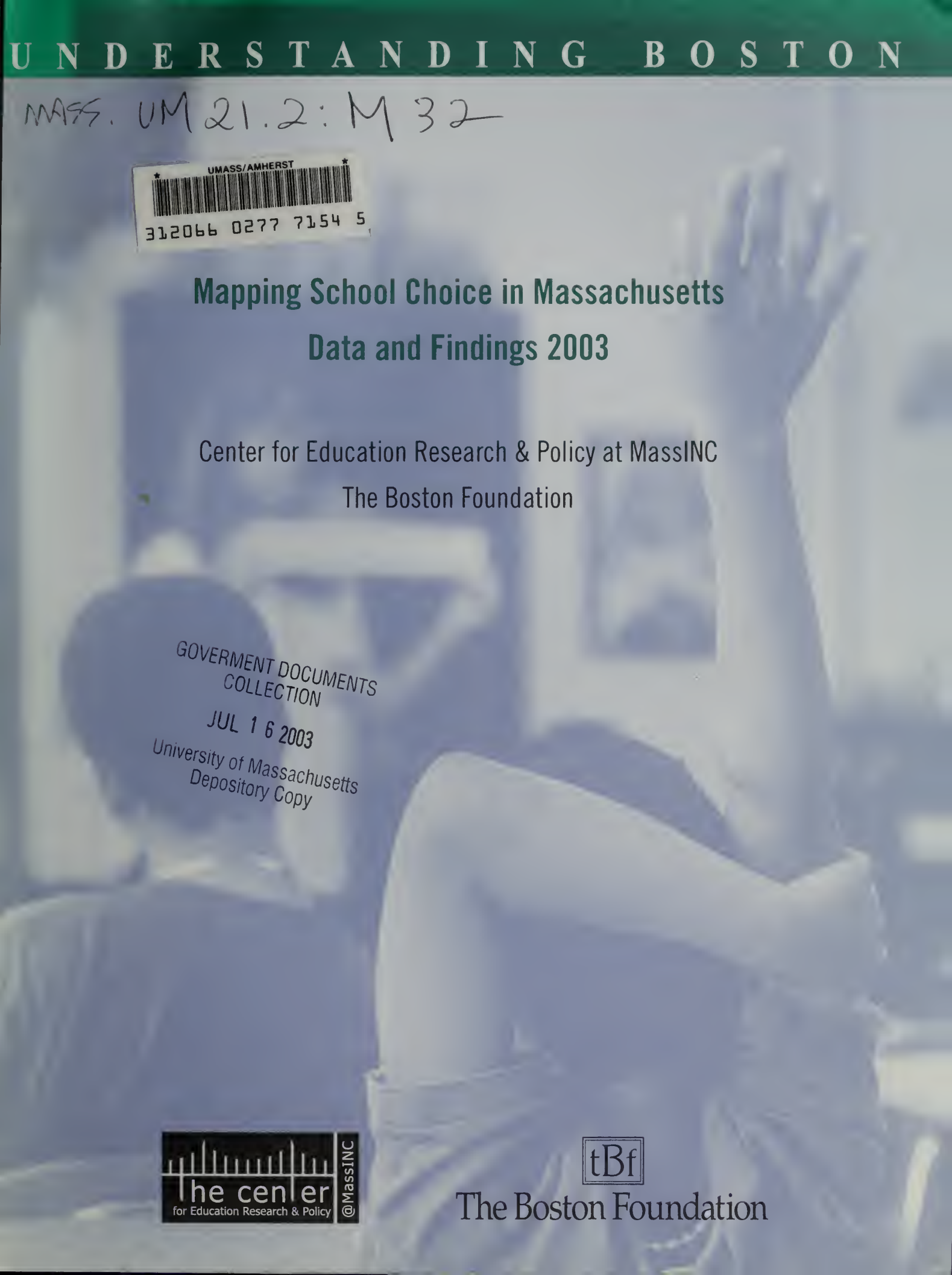

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Mapping School Choice in Massachusetts: Data and Findings 2003 Policy Brief

Introduction

School choice is a highly controversial topic in Massachusetts' educational policy circles these days. In recent years, the Commonwealth has offered students and their families a variety of school choice options, but very little funding has been dedicated to studying the impact of school choice. School choice availability and enrollment trends have not been mapped in the Commonwealth, and, as a result, policymakers are forced to shape a policy agenda based upon conjecture rather than evidence. Independent research has not informed the argument; and thus, the school choice discussion remains largely politicized and ideological. As we seek to shape an effective educational improvement agenda, the collection and analysis of data is imperative to better understand the impact and policy implications of school choice. This report presents that data.

Both nationally and at the state level, school choice has been touted as a promising education reform strategy for a range of reasons. Some advocates argue that from an equity standpoint, school choice provides expanded educational opportunities to low-income and poor students, who have been trapped within persistently underperforming schools. Others believe that students' motivation and performance will be greater if families are able to choose the direction of their children's education. Still others assert that choice will lead to better matching of students and schools, thus improving their educational experience. Proponents of market economics believe that the mainstream educational delivery system will become more efficient and effective because increased competition drives innovation and improvement. Many contend that schools, which are freed from the constraints of the traditional system, will become beacons of learning and laboratories of innovation, developing and sharing promising new educational ideas. Philosophically and pedagogically, advocates believe that school choice offers hope for expanded educational equity, opportunity, and improvement.

Though most Americans favor choice in the most important areas of their lives, school choice has been severely criticized here and across the country. Opponents cite concerns, which include the demise of the American common school and the potential for further balkanization of public education by ethnicity, race, class, and income. Others criticize vouchers and the 2002 U.S. Supreme Court *Zelman* decision for blurring the separation between church and state. Critics of market-based public education oppose the profiteering of private companies that are engaged in school and district management, while some resent any diversion of funds from mainstream schools. Others warn that those who are most at-risk will not benefit from a market-based system because they are the least well equipped to compete for school enrollment. In Massachusetts, we have seen this debate intensify – evidenced by calls for a charter school moratorium, dissatisfaction with school finance formulas, demands for tuition reimbursements, and complaints about "creaming" the most easily educated students from mainstream districts. In the current context of severe state and national budget constraints, these tensions are heightened.

The *Zelman* decision, the widespread growth of charter schools, the choice options featured in the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, and various dissatisfactions with standards-based reform all feed the growing policy chatter on expanding school choice. Policymakers are eager for evidence that enables them to weigh the alternatives and enact effective policy. The Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC, with the support of the Boston Foundation, commissioned this school choice mapping research to fill the informational gap. With this study, prepared by the researchers at the University of Massachusetts' Center for Education Policy, we seek to provide independently gathered evidence to better inform policymakers and researchers and to draw attention to policy issues, which require further attention and investigation. We believe that school choice will continue to play a central role in the education reform debate and that this initial mapping is essential to display and benchmark current school choice phenomena while providing a basis for future trend analysis. Committed to shaping an informed and effective policy agenda, we offer this report as groundwork for a vital and continuing policy conversation.

School choice is a reality for a substantial proportion of families in Massachusetts

A substantial number of Massachusetts' families and students can make real choices about their education, while others do not have this opportunity. Students have an array of schooling choices, including: charter schools, inter-district and intra-district options, METCO, district-based magnet and pilot schools, private and parochial schools, home-schooling, vocational technical schools, and Chapter 766 private special education schools. At least one in four Massachusetts students are in a setting over which their families exercised some form of choice.

Educational Entities in Massachusetts[ii]

Educational Institution	#
Mainstream, regular education districts	300
Commonwealth charter schools (independent)	41
Horace Mann charter schools (district-based)	7
Chapter 766 private special education schools	125
Regional vocational technical schools	30
Private schools (non-Chapter 766)	538

A notable proportion of Massachusetts' students and families are choosing to exercise their school choice options, as detailed in the table below. While many of the Commonwealth's students are educated within the mainstream public school system – where many have intra-district choices – many are being schooled in alternate settings. Increasingly, a hybridized system of education is developing in Massachusetts. Without even considering the substantial number of students engaged in intra-district school choice (let alone those who choose to move from community to community for educational reasons), we know that a minimum of 200,000 students are now participating in forms of choice for which we have data.

At least one in four Massachusetts students are in a setting over which their families exercised some form of choice.

In reality, we know that this figure is much larger because this calculation does not include intra-district choice – a phenomenon, which is widespread but difficult to accurately estimate. Though we are confident that the figures are large, exact statistics on intra-district choice are not included in our calculations because data is neither consistently nor centrally tracked, thus is unavailable. At a minimum, we know that populations from Cambridge and Boston (7,046 and 62,414 students, respectively) can be included in the tally because all students in these districts can exercise intra-district choice.

Distribution of K-12 students in Massachusetts –FY02[iii]

Type of Schooling	Students (#)	Students (%)
All public & private schools	1,072,349	100.0
Intra-district choice	Unknown	Unknown
Private & parochial schools	133,440	12.4
Regional vocational schools	25,141	2.3
Home-schooling	2,300 - 20,000	.21 - 1.9
Charter schools	14,381	1.3
Inter-district choice	8,318	.8
Chapter 766 – Special Education	6,327	.6
METCO	3,313	.3

In addition to formalized school choice, families with economic means can also exert choice by moving to a district with a school system in which they feel confident. This manner of "choosing" cannot be easily quantified, but must be acknowledged as a frequently practiced option. Unfortunately, this school choice "strategy" is not a viable option for most low-income and minority students – the group considered to be the most at-risk within the traditional education delivery system.

Choice opportunities are unevenly distributed across the state

For many students, their ability to exercise school choice remains an accident of birth and is determined by family income and zip code. As a result, not all

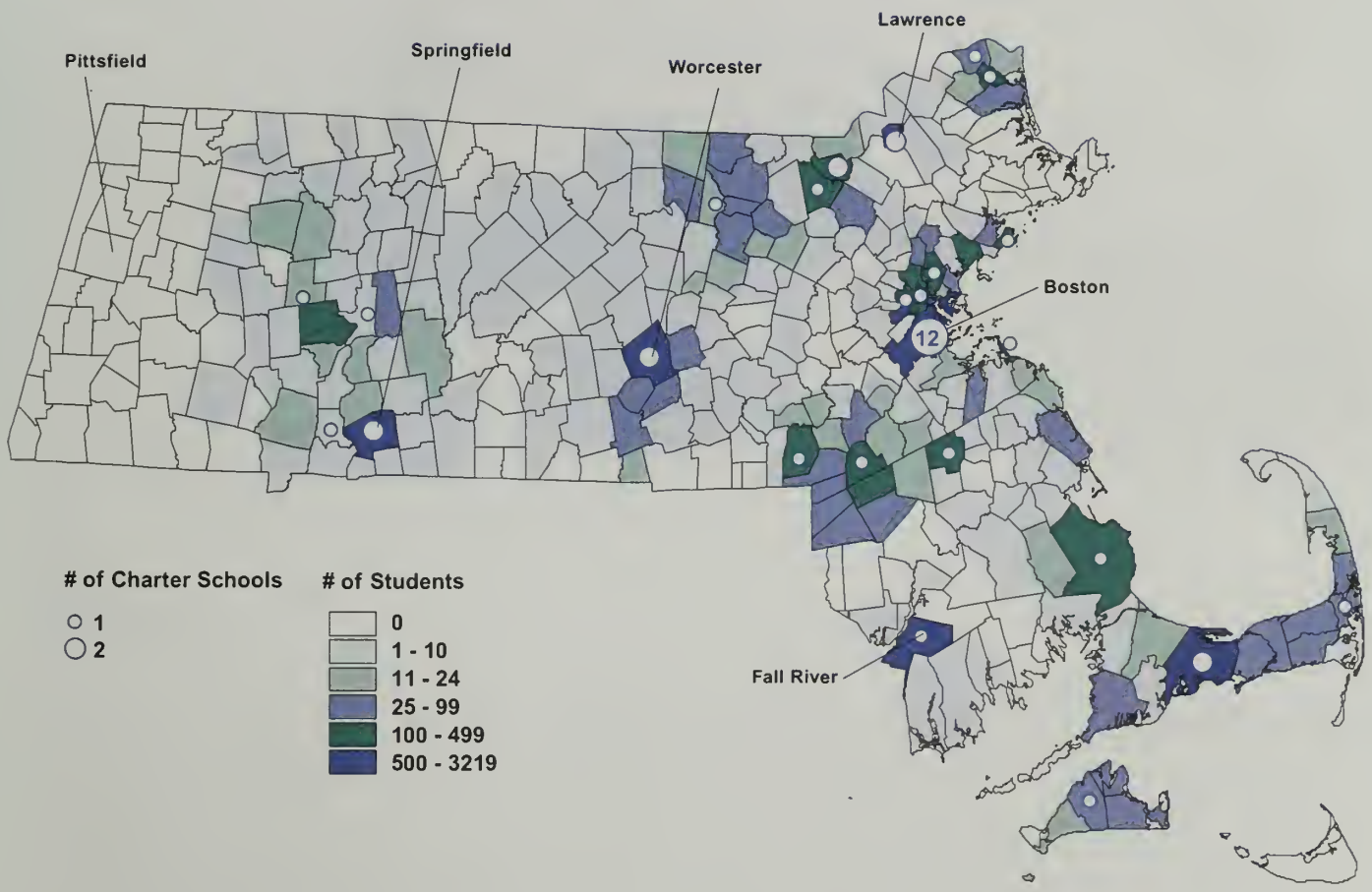
students are benefiting equally from the substantial availability of school choice. A random distribution of choice opportunities and limited enrollment opportunities exist because there are no systems in place to ensure that choice is evenly distributed.

From a geographic perspective, academic options such as METCO and charter schools are not uniformly available to all families. Serving only two urban districts, Boston (3,177 students) and Springfield (136 students), METCO does not benefit students living in the Commonwealth's many other urban hubs. Similarly, charter schools tend to serve urban districts and are less available to students living in rural regions. Nationally, 53% of charter schools are in central cities, compared with 59% in Massachusetts.

Top 10 Districts by Charter School Enrollment

Rank	Sending District	District Charter Student (#)	District Charter Student (%)	% of Total MA Charter Students
1	Boston	3007	4.6	20.1
2	Springfield	1454	5.5	9.7
3	Worcester	1275	4.7	8.5
4	Lawrence	792	5.9	5.3
5	Fall River	612	4.8	4.1
6	Lowell	552	3.5	3.7
7	Malden	474	8.0	3.2
8	Somerville	384	6.2	2.6
9	Lynn	295	1.9	2.0
10	Franklin	275	4.7	1.8

Charter School Enrollment in Massachusetts by District



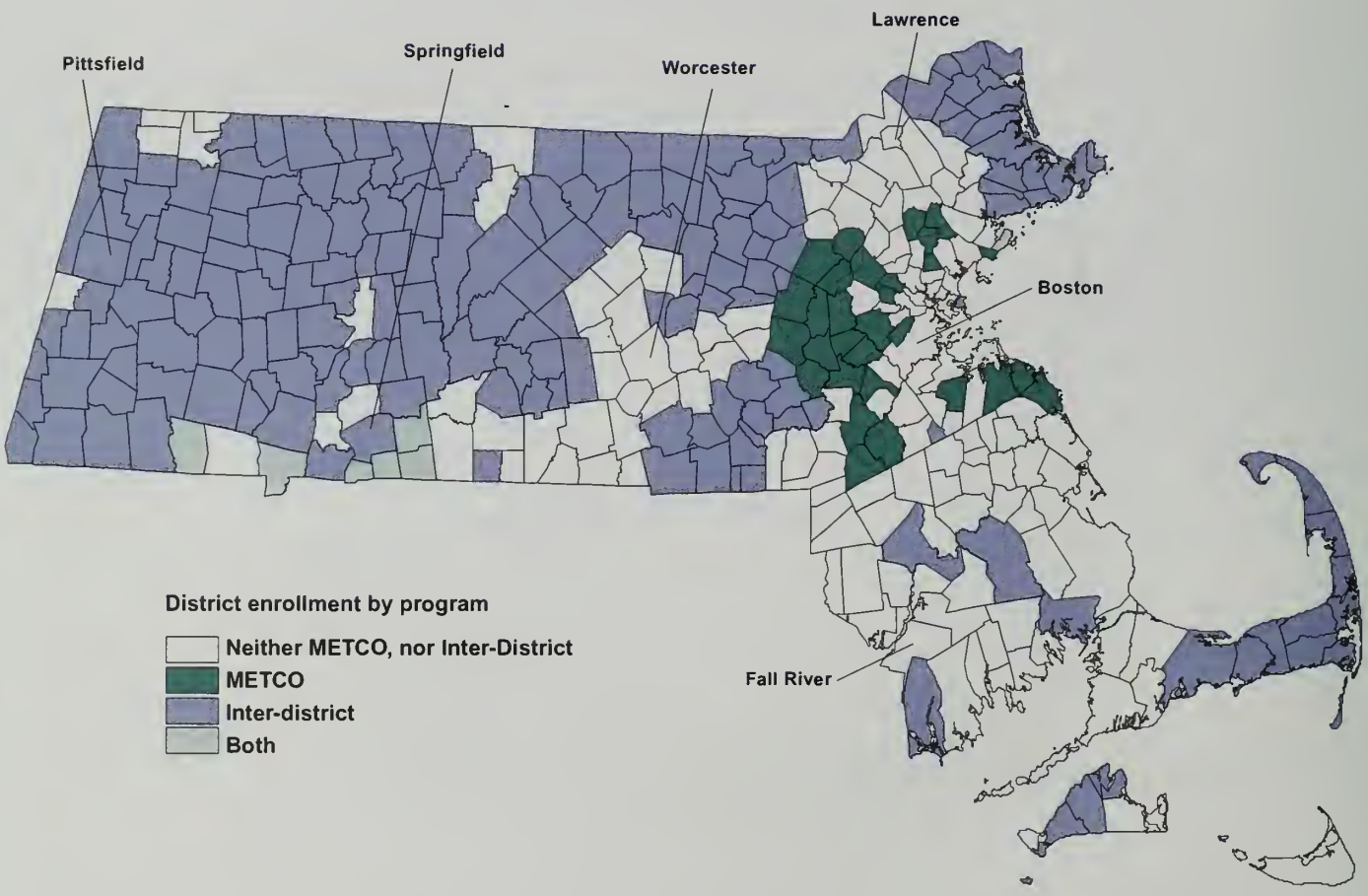
The issue of geographic concentration is further reinforced when considering that 77% (28) of Commonwealth and 100% (6) of Horace Mann charter schools draw a large proportion of their students from a small number of districts (FY02).

- 274 districts do not contain a charter school.
- 98 districts do not send any students to charter schools.

While charter schools generally serve urban areas, inter-district choice remains a somewhat limited option for these students because many surrounding, suburban districts elect not to receive students from urban regions. Only a 41% (122) minority of non-charter, academic districts voted to receive students through inter-district choice, thus dramatically limiting the potential of this state-mandated strategy. Aside from METCO, Boston students generally cannot participate in inter-district choice, since none of the mainstream academic districts surrounding the city have chosen to receive students. For this reason, the overwhelming majority (80.9%) of Boston's inter-district choice participants are attending regional vocational-technical schools.

The uneven distribution of school choice is increased by the uneven distribution of family income. Families with economic means are able to move, thus exacerbating the inequity.

Massachusetts District Participation in METCO and Inter-District Choice



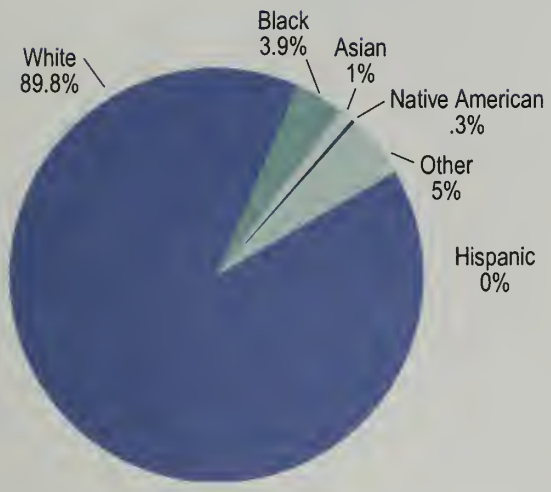
Low-income, minority students are under-represented in school choice participation

From a demographic perspective, public choice alternatives are also unevenly and inequitably distributed. Lower-income and minority populations are under-represented in alternate schooling options.

Statewide, 89.8% of students that participate in inter-district choice are white (compared with 75% of the state's total public school population). As the table below illustrates, inter-district choice seems to lead to accelerated white flight, thus further isolating minority students in districts that, as a matter of state policy, are trying to desegregate.

Sending District	Inter-District Students %	Inter-District Students #	White Inter-District Students #	White Inter-District Students %	Total White Sending District %	Non-White Inter-District Students #	Non-White Inter-District Students %	Total Non-White Sending District %
Worcester	1.9	154	139	90.3	51.5	15	9.7	48.5
Lawrence	1.6	132	94	71.2	11.2	38	28.8	88.8
Brockton	1.7	139	72	51.8	41.3	67	48.2	48.5
All MA Students	100.0	8,318	7,467	89.8	–	849	10.2	–

FY02 Massachusetts Inter-District Choice Students (non-METCO), by Race/Ethnicity



Charter schools serve a population that varies somewhat from that of the sending districts. Proportionate to sending districts, Commonwealth charter schools have somewhat fewer low-income students (37.9% vs. 45.9%), more black students (27% vs. 20%), fewer Hispanic students (16% vs. 24%), fewer bilingual education students (1.3% vs. 10.34%), fewer special education students (8.85% vs. 14.61%), and equivalent numbers of white students (54% vs. 53%).

Unmet demand for school choice is widespread

Families in Massachusetts clearly want to exercise choice over their children's education. Though significant choice options exist, there is no doubt that demand exceeds current capacity. Long waitlists for METCO and many charter schools illustrate this unmet demand for school choice options. However, true demand for choice opportunities could conceivably be underestimated or overestimated based on waitlist figures. In the case of charter schools, students may have joined more than one waitlist, thus inflating perceived demand. On the flip side, demand may also be underestimated. Students who sought places in charter schools may have been discouraged from applying and subsequently did not place their names on waiting lists. Additionally, if more enrollment opportunities existed, more families might have actively sought enrollment.

Charter schools have no trouble attracting a full enrollment wherever they open. This high demand was anticipated, with state law stipulating that up to 4% of the state's total public school population can attend charter schools. However, existing charter schools only have the capacity to serve one-third of that projected number, currently enrolling only 1.35% of total public school students. Magnet and exam schools experience a similar phenomenon, resulting in intense competition for continually over-subscribed spaces.

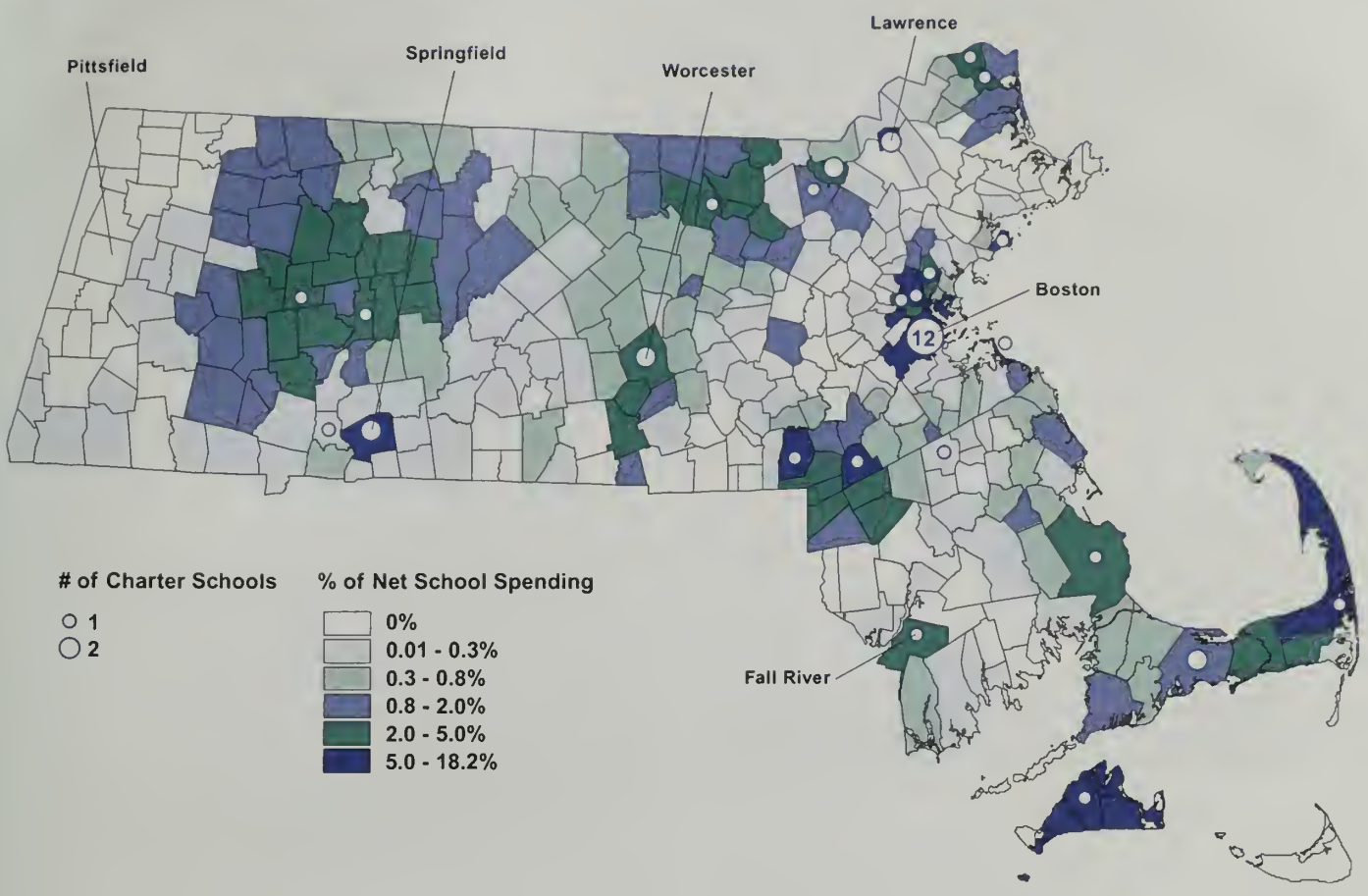
- METCO maintains a waitlist of at least 10,000 students; with an average wait of five years. This waitlist is more than three times the total number of METCO students in FY2002.
- Boston's four vocational schools received 1,712 applications for 982 spaces in 2001-2. There are now just under 100 students on these schools' waitlists for particularly popular specialties.
- Charter schools cannot accommodate the quantity of students, who are interested in attending. Statewide, the DOE estimates that charter school waiting lists included 10,975 places in FY2002.
- Statewide, districts with the largest unmet demand for charter schools included: Boston (3,943), Springfield (2,058), Lawrence (599), Malden (453), and Worcester (359).
- In the Boston-area, waiting lists for Commonwealth and Horace Mann Charter Schools respectively averaged 305 students and 31 students. The table below details this demand.

Metropolitan Boston Charter School Student Counts – FY02

School	Waiting List Estimate	Enrollment Estimate	Wait List (% Enrollment)
TOTAL	**5347**	**4952**	**108.0**
Neighborhood House	1216	220	552.7
Boston Renaissance	1109	1350	82.1
Mystic Valley	814	883	92.2
South Boston Harbor Academy	469	240	195.4
Academy of the Pacific Rim	296	304	97.4
Media & Technology	220	125	176.0
Benjamin Banneker	216	357	60.5
Lynn Community*	212	270	78.5
Conservatory Lab	204	100	204.0
City On A Hill	174	231	75.3
Marblehead Community	114	176	64.8
Health Careers Academy HMCS	101	188	53.7
Boston Evening Academy HMCS	80	170	47.1
Frederick Douglass	43	136	31.6
Roxbury Preparatory	50	168	29.8
Codman Academy	29	34	85.3

*Closed by Department of Education in 2002

Net School Spending on Charter Tuition in Massachusetts by District



The financial impact of school choice can be substantial and is unevenly distributed

Some school districts are experiencing a substantial, negative financial impact from the uneven distribution of school choice. This trend results from the location patterns of charter schools, the availability of inter-district choice options, parent inclination, and the availability of home schooling and private school options. In some larger districts tuition reimbursements are especially hard-hitting, with the losses from tuition reimbursements far exceeding the marginal savings from lower enrollments. Policy-makers will need more data to determine an appropriate mix of choice incentives that does not undermine the effectiveness of public schools.

Tuition Paid by Boston-Area Districts to Charter School (as % of NSS) – FY03

Rank	Sending District	% NSS to Charters
1	Malden	9.71
2	Somerville	7.30
3	Marblehead	5.95
4	Boston	5.93
5	Medford	5.36
6	Everett	3.72
7	Melrose	3.22
8	Cambridge	2.50
9	Stoneham	1.16
10	Wakefield	1.06

Statewide, 132 districts (44.1%) are spending less than 1% of their net school spending (NSS) on charter school tuition payments. However, at the top of end of the spectrum, 16 districts are spending more than 5%.

The city of Boston is currently spending 6% of its NSS. However, the number of charters operating in Boston is still growing, and the Department of Education has projected that Boston will be nearing its 9% NSS cap in a few years.

Inter-district choice impacts schools districts unequally, too, because lower-income districts are more likely to lose tuition income than wealthier ones. Students tend to move towards more affluent districts when participating in inter-district choice (67% of students move to a district with proportionally fewer low-income students than their sending district). Furthermore, more school districts lose tuition money than gain it. Net losses of $0 – $499K were experienced by 167 districts (55.9%), in comparison with 68 districts (22.7%) that experienced net gains of the same amount.

Districts Paying >5% NSS to Charter Schools – FY03 (%)

Rank	Sending District	% NSS to Charters
1	Up-Island	18.20
2	Hull	12.09
3	Tisbury	9.74
4	Malden	9.71
5	Nauset	9.39
6	Edgartown	9.19
7	Martha's Vineyard	7.75
8	Somerville	7.30
9	Oak Bluffs	6.05
10	Lawrence	6.01
11	Springfield	5.98
12	Marblehead	5.95
13	Boston	5.93
14	Medford	5.36
15	Foxboro	5.31
16	Franklin	5.24

Intra-district choice is widespread, though very difficult to track

Though we know the breadth and impact of intra-district choice is significant, exact figures are difficult to quantify because of informal and inconsistent tracking. Officially, 21 districts claim to provide intra-district school choice, but this number climbs when taking into account that intra-district choice occurs through "controlled choice" desegregation plans, magnet schools, pilot schools, transfer waivers, special programs, schools within schools, and other instruments. In districts that do offer intra-district choice, participation varies dramatically from 1% to 100%, depending upon the grade level in question.

Across the state, intra-district choice is constrained by the small size of many districts, which have too few schools to offer any alternatives. A majority of intra-district choice occurs in kindergarten and the elementary grades, though even at these levels, very few districts offer intra-district choice to all students and/or within all schools. At the middle and high school levels, most districts only have one school to "choose;" 206 (68.7%) districts only have a single school at upper grade levels. Decision-making control over intra-district choice varies, occurring at both the central district office level and at the school principal's discretion.

Massachusetts Districts with Single or Multiple Schools at Each Level, FY02

School Level	1 school	2-4 schools	5-9 schools	10+ schools
Elementary/K-8 school	74	119	68	19
Middle school	142	35	6	1
High school	206	14	4	1

Insufficient data exists on intra-district choice enrollment and demand. At a minimum, the following indicators should be tracked so that policymakers can assess access and need.

- How many districts currently offer intra-district choice?
- How many students are participating in intra-district choice, and at what grade levels?

- Within districts that offer intra-district choice, how much space exists at various grade levels?
- How many students are enrolled in magnet schools, and how much demand exists for entry?
- What are the constraints on intra-district school choice?

Meeting "NCLB" mandates for expanded school choice will be challenging

Massachusetts will face a stiff challenge in meeting the mandated expansion of intra-district, and potentially inter-district, choice under the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. This legislation requires districts to provide intra-district choice for students in schools that have failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for at least two years, or that have been designated as "persistently dangerous" by state education authorities. Spaces for intra-district transfers are already limited; thus, implementing NCLB mandates will be challenging.

- In Massachusetts, 210 schools are currently failing to make AYP for at least the second year. These schools are in 37 different districts, and nine are charter schools.
- In Boston, 44 schools with 22,500 students were categorized as under-performing for the second year in FY02. If this status persists, these students will be eligible to choose another district school – a number that far exceeds available intra-district spaces.
- In Boston's East Zone, 20 (67%) elementary and K-8 schools are in their second year of Improvement status; 4 (40%) of middle schools share this designation. Approximately 235 seats are available for the 4,626 students in grades K-5, who have the right to transfer under NCLB.
- In Boston, the only non-vocational inter-district school choice is METCO, with 3,177 (91.6% of all Boston inter-district choice participants).

Federal law states that a district "may not use lack of capacity to deny students the options to transfer" out of under-performing schools. However, in many cases, districts lack sufficient intra-district options to accommodate students wishing to transfer. In these instances, federal guidelines declare that a district must "to the extent practicable, work with other districts in the area to establish a cooperative agreement that would allow inter-district choice." However, the track record to date with inter-district choice indicates that these NCLB mandates will be difficult to implement.

Vocational & special education choice systems are comprehensive and equitable

Massachusetts has successfully developed vocational and special education choice systems, which provide students with comprehensive and equitable options. As models, these systems demonstrate the viability of developing policy that would expand school choice options to all students on a systemic basis.

Students all across the state generally have access to vocational schooling options. In contrast with other school choice options, vocational technical options are more equitably dispersed throughout the state. Students utilize vocational-technical schools at a significantly higher rate than charter schools or inter-district choice. However, little is known about the actual demand for vocational education – an absence of knowledge that could be addressed with more research.

- Of the state's 206 operational town districts, 169 (82.0%) are members of regional vocational-technical schools. Within the state's 55 regional academic districts, 37 (67%) have at least one member town that is also a member of regional vocational-technical school. One independent vocational school district exists.
- There are intra-district vocational schooling opportunities in 39 districts.
- Boston-area students have particularly high access with the option to attend 17 (23.2%) of the state's 73 vocational technical schools.

- Vocational-technical schools have more special education students than the state average. In fiscal year 2002 approximately 24.4% of regional vocational technical school students were special education students. This is much higher than the figure for non-vocational districts, which had approximately 15.3% of students receiving special education services.
- Regional vocational students are as likely to be eligible for free or reduced lunch as the overall K-12 student population (24.8% vs. 25.3%). However, these figures may underestimate the low-income status of vocational-technical students because teenagers tend to under-report income eligibility.

With its Chapter 766 law, Massachusetts has been a forerunner in making special education opportunities available and has played a national leadership role in promoting the expansion of these entitlements. Historically, special education students (especially those with severe learning challenges) were largely ignored by the public education system. Today, school districts are responsible for providing disabled students with free, appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. These placements reflect the choices of a team, which is charged with ensuring that the child receives an appropriate education. In the vast majority of instances, teams have decided to accommodate special education students within mainstream public schools, though in some instances alternate public or private placement is deemed more appropriate.

In Massachusetts, a system exists to support families of qualifying children on decisions involving special education options. While questions can be raised about the degree of "choice" associated with special education placements, statistical knowledge about this population is important as an indicator of the quantity of students being served outside of the mainstream public education system.

- Statewide, 150,003 students received special education services in 2001-2002.
- Statewide, 4,959 students received special education services in private day schools during the 2001-02 school year. Another 1,368 were in residential programs.
- Special education students attend 125 private schools in Massachusetts, whose tuition is paid with public funds through the Chapter 766 program.

Boston private & parochial schools disproportionately serve white students

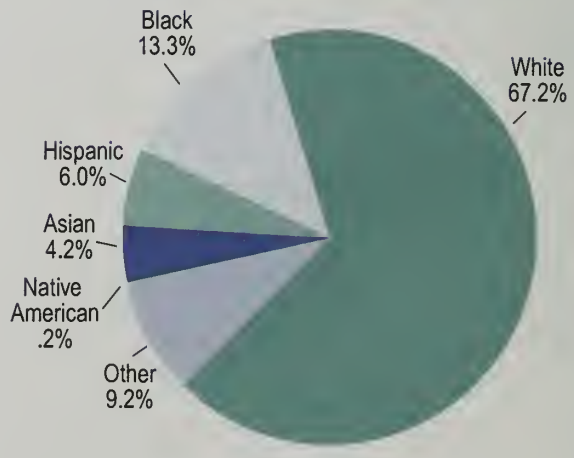
Boston families with sufficient economic means have the choice of sending their children to private, fee-based schools. White students from Boston are disproportionately served by private schools.

In Massachusetts, 538 private and parochial schools (non-Chapter 766) served a population of 133,440 students in K-12 (12.4% of the state's total enrollment) according to the Department of Education. The majority of Massachusetts' private school students go to Catholic schools—about 83,000, versus about 50,000 in non-Catholic private schools.

Private school options are especially prevalent in the Boston area. According to DOE data, the Boston area has a larger proportion of its students in private schools than the statewide average (18% vs. 12.4%). Of the 15,405 Boston-area students, who attend private schools, 11,821 (76.7%) of them go to Catholic schools.

Some racial/ethnic groups are less likely than others to be in private schools. Hispanic students are represented at considerably lower rates in private schools than in public schools statewide (4.3% vs. 10.8%) and in the Boston area (6.0% vs. 16.8%). Black students are also somewhat less represented in private schools statewide (6.9% vs. 8.6%) and in the Boston area (13.3% vs. 20.5%).

Metropolitan Boston FY02
Private School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



Conclusion – Our Path Forward

From our map of school choice, it becomes apparent that we are at a crossroads. The topography is clearer, but we still have many unanswered questions. Data enables us to know more about the big picture – where we stand as a Commonwealth, what progress has been made, and which challenges lie before us. We know there is substantial school choice participation and opportunity for some students, but significant unmet demand remains. Evidence shows that, while choices exist for many, entitlements and opportunity are unevenly and inequitably distributed. We see that those who are most at risk – lower-income, minority students – have fewer school choice options than others. We know that choice has a major impact on some school districts and little or no impact on others. Equipped with this map, we can make informed decisions about how our policy exploration should continue.

Mapping shows who is participating in school choice and how this choice is segmented. However, we still lack vital data and analysis on why choices are made and how these choices impact individual students, schools, and districts. Additionally, we lack knowledge about how school choice impacts the mainstream system – financially, institutionally, and pedagogically. We must undertake significant qualitative and quantitative research to ensure that policies are informed by evidence and not conjecture, independent analysis and not ideology. Policymakers must carefully consider the data and policy implications before setting the future school choice course for the Commonwealth. Our path forward entails critical examination of the following questions.

- ***What motivates a student and his family to enroll (and remain at) alternative schools?*** What factors influence school choices, and what criteria do families use to inform their decisions? Why are some families choosing and others not? Where do families get the information that informs their choices? How involved are students in the school choice?
- ***Are students and parents satisfied with their choices?*** What level of satisfaction do students and their families experience with their chosen school? How frequently do students who leave the mainstream system return, and for what reasons?
- ***Does school choice impact student performance?*** Can changes in student achievement and motivation be seen? By increasing educational options for families, do we improve the likelihood of effective school/student matching?
- ***Does school choice generate constructive competition within the overall educational system?*** Is there evidence that this competitive pressure has resulted in innovation or improvement? Has it enhanced quality and diversity of educational offerings in either mainstream or alternative schools?
- ***How does school choice impact schools and districts financially?*** What are the costs and benefits of school choice to mainstream public school systems? How should current financial formulas be revised to minimize the negative impact of tuition reimbursement on mainstream districts and/or to assist with the capitalization costs faced by charter schools?
- ***What is the effect of school choice in cities and their contiguous suburbs?*** Why do some towns choose to opt in or out of inter-district choice? How does expansion of choice – including the new mandates from No Child Left Behind – interact with desegregation orders? How do school choice programs affect diversity in other jurisdictions? Do choice programs appear to enhance socio-economic and racial diversity in schools? What strategies can be leveraged to enable the Commonwealth to meet No Child Left Behind's mandates for expanded school choice?
- ***Which school choice policies might result in a more equitable distribution of school choice opportunities?*** Have other states and jurisdictions found ways and means of distributing choice opportunities more equitably?

Answers to these questions require data gathering, analysis and discussion of potential policy implications. In Massachusetts, the education system can be increasingly described as a mixed delivery model – with public, private, and quasi-public providers – as is the case in the healthcare and early childhood education sectors. Mapping and research must continue to provide the data for analysis needed to inform policymaking and enable leaders to determine the right balance of school choice options and incentives.

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[i] The Metropolitan Council on Educational Opportunity (METCO) has operated an inter-district choice program, separate from the state's School Choice law, in the Boston and Springfield regions since 1965. A state-funded program, whose goals are enhanced educational opportunity for urban children and voluntary integration of suburban public schools, allows Boston and Springfield students to attend school in nearby suburbs. Though METCO enrolls a small number of students (.3% of the total student population), it was explicitly designed to accelerate desegregation in urban areas and enrolls an overwhelming majority of black and Hispanic students.

[ii] For more detailed information on data sources, please see the full text of the report.

[iii] 616 students are listed as participating in both regional vocational schools and inter-district choice.

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